QUALITATIVE APPROACH AND GROUNDED THEORY FOR ASSESSING USER EVALUATION OF LIBRARY SERVICES:

CITY LIBRARY NETWORK OF PERUGIA
A CASE STUDY

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AIM OF THE RESEARCH
AIM OF THE RESEARCH (1)

The research aims at investigating the degree of satisfaction, the motivation, the needs and the perceptions of both real and potential users of libraries, by means of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

The research also intends to be a reflection on methodologies and on the relationship between empirical and theoretical reflection in biblioteconomy.
AIM OF THE RESEARCH (2)

Regarding the theoretical objectives the research also covers some reflections on methodology:

1. To demonstrate the reliability of data collected through qualitative investigation techniques in order to prove that the qualitative approach is indeed “analytical” and “diagnostic”.

2. To consider the user from a holistic point of view through the concept of the “fluidity” that the individual requires.

3. To recuperate the notion of interpretation as a new research instrument and not as an obstacle to the objectivity of the investigation because it can be used to reach a deeper awareness of the user’s needs, whether he expresses them or not, and to understand the motivation behind his use of a library and his perceptions of the experience.
The starting point for this methodological reflection was a change of perspective that was a spontaneous consequence of the refusal of the dichotomy *qualitative versus quantitative*.

This new perspective considers the two approaches in fact deeply complementary.
“There is no one act, no single decision taken in research which is not an inextricable mix of quality and quantity [...] Each one constitutes aspects which, though mostly indistinguishable, are in joint presence in every single phase of an investigation: the ying and yang, as it were, of every effective operation of investigation [...] There is, thus, an essential tension between quality and quantity in every data collection and analysis technique”.

(E. Campelli, *Da un luogo comune. Elementi di metodologia delle scienze sociali*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1999.)
THE CHANGE OF QUESTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative Approach</th>
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<tr>
<td>o Data structure</td>
<td>o Who are the library users?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Performance indicators</td>
<td>o Subjective aspects of users’ motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Number of users</td>
<td>o Users’ requirements</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Efficiency indicators</td>
<td>o Users’ perceptions of the quality of the service</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Users’ needs</td>
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GROUNDRED THEORY
One of the main characteristics of the Grounded Theory, the fact that "it fits and works", makes it particularly suitable for application in all those disciplines in which research and theoretical reflection are defined as the basis for the development of operative indications and strategies directed at carrying out change; Biblioteconomy is a good example.

The Grounded Theory Methodology offered a methodological support and reference theory in order to ensure that a correct approach to the investigation was followed in accordance with qualitative logic, in respect to the data and the categories which must not be heterodox, but rather, founded on the data itself.
Grounded Theory is the *construction of a theory* which does not originate in a logical deduction process, nor in an abstract speculative procedure which takes inspiration from pre-existent theoretical reflections, nor even does it confer the value of empirical proof to data in order to verify and illustrate the aforementioned suppositions.
This is because the approach views the data as the 
\textit{source for a theory} which can make sense of the data itself, explaining in this way the origin and the reason for the theory and granting the data a theoretical statute which goes well beyond that of mere elements useful for the verification of theories based on non-data sources.
This new concept of data, as a *generator of theory*, has determined the need to approach the investigation without narrowing down research design into excessively detailed questioning, but rather, prefers using a generative “*What’s going on here?*” style of enquiry (Glaser, 1998), which embraces the full complexity of the issue, rather than attempting to reduce its elements to a few controllable variables.
KEY CONCEPT

- **An approach** to describe relationships where little is known or to provide a fresh take on existing knowledge;
- **A method** to systematically build integrated sets of concepts from systematically obtained empirical data;
- **A process** of composing knowledge through intimate contact with subjects and events under study;
- **A theory** that is shaped by data as well as by the researcher;
It can be easily understood how biblioteconomy, which perceives library service evaluation as one of the keys to improving libraries, could make good use of a research methodology which gives priority to investigating input supplied by users who are, or should be, the ones served by such institutions, thus allowing for the generation of useful theories based on a practical foundation.
A CASE STUDY:
CITY LIBRARY NETWORK OF PERUGIA (ITALY)
A case study has been chosen as the most suitable instrument for the holistic approach which characterizes this research, and the most effective strategy to explain the how and why of the phenomena to be examined, never losing sight, however, of its unsuitability to shed light on frequency and rate (the where and how much).

(Yin R. K., *Case study research, design and methods*, Sage, Newbury Park, California, 2003)
The entire research design in a case study is heavily conditioned by the way in which the unit of analysis is defined. *What is my case?* is the question a researcher should always be able to answer.

In more clearly defined situations, such as clinical research, the case coincides with the individual. In other environments, rather than an individual, it may involve a group, an organization or an event.

The definition of the unit of analysis is closely connected to the way in which the initial research questions and the study hypotheses have been defined.
The case study is a particularly useful instrument in the qualitative approach and in the evaluation of library services because in both these issues the aim is not the generalization of results but the in depth nature of the research.

Furthermore, it is an instrument coherent with the object of study, the “library”, which due to its unique bond with the territory in which it is located, must exclude ambition of generalization.
CASE STUDY:
CITY LIBRARY NETWORK OF PERUGIA

- It gives the impression of being a “modular” system, therefore able to be broken down and analyzed in its individual parts from different points of view.
- Perugia is a small city that allows the dynamics of cultural consumerism to be easily observed.
- The nomination of a new director just a few months before the beginning of the investigation indicated that a change of direction in the management of the network was already underway – one which has revealed itself to be more dynamic and more attentive towards the needs of the public, showing a greater propensity to enquire about its expectations.
CASE STUDY: 
CITY LIBRARY NETWORK OF PERUGIA

THE LIBRARIES
- The Augusta Library
- The Biblionet Library of Ponte San Giovanni;
- The Multimediale Library;
- The Sandro Penna Library of San Sisto;

THE USERS
The case study (Users of the Library Network) was divided into two macro-units:
- real users
- potential users
FIRST STEP
To isolate and examine single aspects of four libraries from the global context depending on the specific questions.

SECOND STEP
Reassembling the pieces at the final stage of analysis. Reconstructing the identity of the Library Network usage goes well beyond a simple summary.

CASE STUDY:
CITY LIBRARY NETWORK OF PERUGIA
AUGUSTA LIBRARY: SWOT SYNTHESIS

**STRENGTHS**
- Historical patrimony;
- Located near University;
- Has roots in the “collective imagination”;

**OPPORTUNITIES**
- Opening of a deconsacrated Church to free up the reading room, thus no longer using library space for other services and activities;

**WEAKNESSES**
- Located within the town’s limited traffic zone;
- The premises themselves and the interaction with the public are not user-friendly;

**THREATS**
- Possibility it could be perceived only as a conservation library;
- Users are mostly academics and students;
SANDRO PENNA LIBRARY: SWOT SYNTHESIS

**STRENGTHS**
- Immediately recognisable;
- Premises are young and dynamic;
- Large open spaces and near by theatre;

**WEAKNESSES**
- Service management and usage is very “traditional”, static;
- Children’s section is not completely adapt for its purpose;

**OPPORTUNITIES**
- Coordination with the theatre
- Located close to many schools;
- The district is undergoing a phase of expansion;

**THREATS**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Location: Ponte San Giovanni</td>
<td>Inadequate design of the layout of the children’s section;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is a young district, the library</td>
<td>- Difficult to recognize;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is centrally positioned within it</td>
<td>- Lack of patrimony in relation to the social context (foreigners);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and near commercial activities;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPPORTUNITIES</td>
<td>THREATS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better re-design of interior</td>
<td>Possibility that it becomes identified as only a local library;</td>
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<tr>
<td>spaces;</td>
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MULTIMEDIALE LIBRARY
### MULTIMEDIALE LIBRARY: SWOT SYNTHESIS

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<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Deep roots in the local community;</td>
<td>- Interior spaces are small;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The building has a spacious garden and terraces;</td>
<td>- Low external visibility;</td>
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<tr>
<th>OPPORTUNITIES</th>
<th>THREATS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Re-opening of the children’s section;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Terrace can be covered;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Garden can be used to a greater advantage;</td>
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FIELDWORK
On an operational level, the investigation foresaw the use of:

- *Questionnaires* to evaluate user satisfaction.
- *Face-to-face interviews with Opinion Leaders* were arranged and carried out with a selection of Opinion Leader citizens with an explorative and advocacy finality.
- *Focus group sessions* aimed at examining specific issues raised by the questionnaires, enquiring not only into the “how much” of the incidence of certain variables but more interestingly into the “why”.
FIELDWORK: FIRST STEP

- Field-work began in December 2008 and in its first phase took the form of a series of meetings with the library director and staff members, with the aim of sharing the objectives of the investigation and verifying that the library could indeed sustain the process.

- The motivation of the staff and its full involvement, it should be remembered, are determining factors if one wishes a library to be closely connected to the reality in which it operates, and to be open to dialogue, dynamic, able to read and interpret its cultural context of reference and to find the most successful solutions to meeting the requirements directly and indirectly expressed by the users.
These first meetings, in line with the Grounded Theory perspective, can be considered an initial part of the field-work.

In this way we can consider the director and the library staff as *expert witnesses* who can offer a natural vision of the issue, in as much as they are carriers of a “focalized” point of view.
Due to the aforementioned particular characteristics of the Library Network and the specific moment of dynamism which is experiencing, and also to the uniqueness of the city context which made it possible, we felt it was useful to involve a small group of citizens, considered *Opinion Leaders*, with whom the technique of the Qualitative Interview was applied.

This was in line with the objective of investigating in greater depth how the Library Network is perceived by people who are directly involved in the organization and management of different aspects of city life and this in itself turned out to be a powerful instrument of advocacy.
The interview which undoubtedly represents the most highly privileged form of data collection in social sciences, is an instrument which can be used in a significant way in the context of the participation which characterizes qualitative research and which, unlike interviews with questionnaires, places the interviewer and the interviewee in a position in which their verbal exchange and sense of reciprocity contribute to the building of knowledge.
THEORETICAL SAMPLING (1)

The selection of the Opinion Leaders used a theoretical sampling design, reasoned and not probabilistic, in which the representativity of the subjects interviewed was established not on a statistical basis but on one of typology in order to ensure they represent the diversified social situations, thus reflecting the social complexity of the issue being investigated.

In this type of sampling the definition of the sample is not finalized before the data collection is underway, but continues throughout the collecting and elaboration phases.
The choice of cases takes place progressively throughout the research process, based on what potential they might have in offering a contribution to the *in fieri* theoretical interests of the researcher.

The small number of the samples is justified by the intensity of the technique in which “one single case of an interviewer being able to create a pleasant feeling of empathy with the interviewee can often be more useful than dozens of questionnaires in understanding certain social dynamics”.

AIM OF THE INTERVIEWS

The aim of the interviews was to identify crucial issues and highlight those which require further study – in other words, listening to the description of each individual’s concept of what they imagine a library should be, listening to their “library stories”, one can “explore” the collective imagination and paint a general picture of the expectations people have of libraries, ultimately achieving the identification of the issues affecting the library network in examination.
“Library advocates have their own stories about how the library has made a difference in their lives. Thank you letters can be a good source of library stories. So can friends and users. One library asked library school students to spend a Saturday interviewing library users. Every library should have cards placed strategically to make it easy for patrons to share their “success stories”. Some people thanked ALA for sponsoring its “Libraries Change Lives” contest and giving them an opportunity to share their stories.....

ADVOCACY

"........sharing these stories in testimony before governing bodies, interviews with reporters or conversations with the college president, school principal and other leaders is one of the most powerful ways to make the case for library support."

*(Library Advocate’s Handbook, American Library Association, Chicago, 2008).*
VISE logic data analysis with ATLAS.ti
Over the last few years there has been a lot of talk about the marriage between computers and qualitative research, with the effect, on a methodological level, of increasing the precision and the reliability of a researcher’s classifications, improving the rigorousness of his reasoning and guaranteeing an audit trail of his claims, which has long been considered one of the main weaknesses of qualitative research.
ATLAS.ti, software CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software), is generally considered the one best able to highlight innovative methodological approaches.

ATLAS.ti was designed to facilitate the development of a theoretical model firmly based on text, that is to say, to produce scientific knowledge by letting the categories of analysis of the researcher interact with the meanings constructed by the subjects in the discourse.

(Milesi P., Castellani P., L’analisi qualitativa di testi con il programma ATLAS.ti in Metodi qualitativi in psicologia sociale, a cura di Bruno M. Mazzara, Roma, Carocci Editore, 2008.)
Furthermore, the *network structure* of the program recalls the logic of recursivity and interconnection which is the basis of the Grounded Theory.

Although it was not designed exclusively to respond to the needs of research based on the theoretical and methodological perspective of Grounded Theory, it contains explicit reference to it.

The analysis procedure foresees, as a first move, the creation of a Hermeneutic Unit (HU):

The H.U. can be likened to a file we have in our computer and it contains not only references to files to be analyzed but also to sets of other objects which illustrate the route of conceptual analysis the researcher is following.

One can visualize documents for analysis whether they be text documents, images, videos, and audio registrations: in ATLAS.ti language these are called Primary Documents (PD)”. 
Once PDs (in our case, transcriptions of the qualitative interviews) are placed in the files, one can begin the first operation of *open coding* which consists of linking a selection of words, phrases or paragraphs (*quotations*) to emergent and sensibilizing conceptual categories (*codes*).

In our case, the decision was taken to favour an operation of codification which did not follow the *line-by-line* rule, but which gave codes as much to entire paragraphs as single words, assigning a general sense to parts of the text in their entirety, thereby avoiding setting ourselves limitations according to standards of “quantity”.
ATLAS.ti: OPEN CODING

La tua idea di Biblioteca. Che cos'è una biblioteca? Cosa dovrebbe essere? Frequenti le biblioteche di Perugia?

Sono stato un assiduo utente della Biblioteca Augusta, nello specifico delle biblioteche perugine, nel periodo del Liceo e nel periodo dell’Università praticamente era il mio luogo di studio, anche quotidianamente. Ho usato anche dei servizi bibliotecari per la ricerca nei corpi universitari o nelle scuole superiori. Infine il mio percorso scolastico-educativo sinceramente ha abbandonato la frequentazione dell’Augusta. Sono un affezionato frequentatore, per motivi personali, della Biblioteca delle Nuove, e quindi sono molto legato a quella biblioteca uno perché mi interessano i fumetti e poi perché inevitabilmente si costruiscono amicizie l’intorno.

La domanda “cosa dovrebbe essere una biblioteca oggi?” È una domanda difficile anche perché...
VISE logic is fulfilled in the successive operations of codification, until the *Core Category* is identified and at that point it is possible to visualize the properties of objects and the relationships between them (*visualization*), without losing the global meaning of the text even as you work on a specific level (*integration*), whilst still maintaining an intuitive and innovative approach to the research (*serendipity, exploration*).
CONCLUSIONS
CONCLUSIONS

Evaluation of users’ needs and perceptions seem to be the most fertile for the implementation of qualitative techniques.

It is the kind in which the results of a certain type of research, stepping outside the usual schemes, favouring a direct contact with the users, listening to them and being willing to reflect on any points raised, can actually be substantial and significative because

“Quantitative research finds what it looks for but we will never know anything about what it did not look for. Qualitative research finds what it finds but we will never know what it does not find”.